

MEXICO

See (sip), learn (sip), enjoy (sip)

The tequila trail leads to Jalisco state and a course in production, history, culture and, of course, tasting.

By Alex Pulaski

GUADALAJARA, Mexico — As Bordeaux is to France and Porto is to Portugal, Tequila is to Mexico: both a libation and a destination.

But not just anywhere in Mexico. The wellspring of tequila production is in the west-central state of Jalisco, home to Mexico's second-largest city, Guadalajara, as well as the nearby town of Tequila.

U.S. tequila sales have doubled in the last decade, and the spirit's growing popularity prompted my wife and me to set out in January to trace the river back to its source.

During a long weekend, our guide, Mexico City-based Clayton Szczech (sounds like "check") shepherded us through a crash course in tequila production techniques, tasting, history and culture.

Intermingled with forays for shopping, art and architecture, we visited bars and bottle shops, tasting rooms and fields. We stumbled across tequila tributaries even when we weren't looking for them: *borrachitos* (milk candies flavored with tequila) in the gigantic San Juan de Dios market; hand-blown *Dama Juana* glass bottles designed to transport tequila; small sponges made from agave fiber in the Tonalá shopping area; and, resting against a wall in the Palacio de Gobierno, a 2-ton volcanic stone wheel known as a *tahona*, its edges worn from years of crushing cooked agave to release the juices.

"This is the house that tequila built," Szczech told us, introducing the government palace, finished in the late 1700s in part from taxes on agave-based liquors known as *mezcals*. Tequila is a mezcal, but only a mezcal made from the Weber



ALEX PULASKI

CLAYTON SZCZECZ explains the agave harvest in Tequila, Mexico. Only mezcal made from Weber blue agave can be called tequila.

blue agave can be called tequila.

After a brief afternoon introduction to tequila tasting, followed by a shopping break, Szczech took me to Mezonte (www.mezonte.com), an appointment-only mezcal tasting room. There, surrounded by photos of small-scale family producers, owner Pedro Jimenez led a discussion that was as much about the individuals making the spirits and their growing regions as the drink itself.

We passed most of our second day shopping in and around Guadalajara, leaving our final day for Tequila itself, about an hour's drive northwest.

It's a company town — Jose Cuervo — and at Mundo Cuervo, you have your choice of group tours (charges apply) and can browse the giant gift shop.

Instead, we took a road less traveled, visiting the Museo los Abuelos (admission 10 pesos,

about 65 cents) to see tequila-making artifacts and spend a couple hours at the small-scale Tequila Fortaleza distillery.

Fortaleza relies on old-world production methods such as using stone *tahonas* to crush the agave and not modern mechanical rollers. We watched a laborer — *ajimador* — harvest an agave plant and rapidly strip its leaves, and we meandered through production areas filled with boilers, copper stills,

pits, fermentation tanks and a bustling bottling room.

Then into underground caves, where tequila hibernates in barrels. We sipped and listened as Szczech poured at a bar set inside the cave.

In the dim lighting, as the spirit warmed us, it felt almost as if Szczech were holding service in tequila church.

travel@latimes.com

Hold the lime, the salt, the shot glass

Tequila, from *blanco* to extra *añejo*, is best sipped like a wine to appreciate the flavor, savor the *terroir*.

By Alex Pulaski

GUADALAJARA, Mexico — "The first taste is to warm you up," tequila guide Clayton Szczech told me. "Let it wash out your mouth. It's like stretching your muscles — not always entirely pleasant, but necessary."

So began my official introduc-

tion to tequila, which transpired within the nearly 100-year-old confines of Cantina la Fuente in downtown Guadalajara. I had downed plenty of margaritas before, and the occasional — and, for me, wholly unpleasant — shot of tequila, but Szczech had promised to grant me a lesson in and an appreciation for the spirit, distilled from the Weber blue agave.

Go slowly, he said. On the second sip, hold your breath and let the tequila coast over your tongue, back and forth. Then swallow and exhale. That burning sensation is your mouth dispatching an initial panic signal to the brain.

Now, with the palate's screaming done, you can begin to taste the flavors of different types of tequila, starting with the *blancos* (whites) — the purest expression of the distiller's art. Szczech prefers *blancos*, which are not barrel-aged.

"You can hide flaws in a barrel," he said. *Blancos* are also known as *plata*, or silver, tequilas.

Next come *reposados*, or rested tequilas, whose golden color hints at the wood barrel-aging process of at least two months.

Finally, the aged *añejos* and even extra *añejos*, which take on smoothness, complexity and darker hues as they stay longer in

the barrel.

Regardless of which pleases your palate, Szczech said, don't fall into the all-too-common trap of numbing the mouth with salt and lime, then slamming down a fiery shot.

"Tequila is best treated and thought of like wine, because wine expresses *terroir*," he said, referring to the unique combinations of geology, climate and geography that lend wines their characteristics.

"If you don't want to taste it, why are you drinking it?"

travel@latimes.com



LOU SPIRITO Los Angeles Times

Goat stew, mariachis and powdery spells

The variety seems all but endless in the markets and shops of Guadalajara.

By Alex Pulaski

GUADALAJARA, Mexico — As Mexico's handicrafts capital, Guadalajara and its environs dangle seemingly endless shopping possibilities.

High-toned Tlaquepaque and more down-to-earth Tonalá deservedly dominate the shopping marquee, but to immerse yourself in Guadalajara and Mexico itself, direct your first steps to Mercado Libertad. The three-story marketplace is better known as San Juan de Dios for the neighborhood and the church of the same name.

With more than 2,600 stalls wedged into nearly half a million square feet, San Juan de Dios contains a dizzying array of merchandise, fruit, vegetables and prepared foods. A goat skull signifies that *birria* is bubbling in a pot, or try a regional specialty known as a *torta ahogada* — literally a "drowned sandwich" swimming in a tomato broth.



ALEX PULASKI

OH, THE POSSIBILITIES: Get your shopping feet wet in Guadalajara's Mercado Libertad, which has more than 2,600 stalls.

"*Uvas, uvas*," a vendor intoned, advertising grapes above the chattering of caged songbirds. Other stalls sold sugar cane, candy, ornate belts and buckles, pottery, brightly woven fabrics, even spells, in powder form, promising potent doses of steady work, money or

even hate.

We began with market day in Tonalá on a Sunday (it also falls on Thursdays). In retrospect, based on the poor-quality merchandise in street stalls and the pressing crowds, I'd recommend any day but the two market days.

The shops in Tonalá, unlike most street stalls, carry a variety of merchandise, from blown glass to intricate tile to fine furniture.

A couple of our instant favorites were the Cristacolor glass-blowing works (www.cristacolor.com.mx), where we watched orange blobs of molten glass being transformed into peacock shapes, and Forja Española (www.forjaespanola.com), populated by fantastically shaped metal sculptures and brightly painted furniture.

Allow an afternoon or more to explore Tlaquepaque, where shops — and prices — aim higher than in Tonalá. Goods range from a \$5 bracelet to a \$2,300 granite-topped bar. When you need a break, listen to mariachi bands — Jalisco state is the birthplace of mariachi music — at the garden courtyard known as El Parián.

Steer clear of the food and mixed drinks there, however; they tend to be overpriced and underwhelming. Along Calle Independencia are several worthy restaurants, among them Casa Fuerte and Casa Luna, both set in courtyards graced by trees and a fountain.

travel@latimes.com

A plaster canvas for muralist's fury and genius

José Clemente Orozco's frescoes in Guadalajara target politicians, the church and conquistadors.

By Alex Pulaski

GUADALAJARA, Mexico — The anger bottled in muralist José Clemente Orozco's work is immediately apparent in his harsh reds and distorted figures, but investing a little extra time and per-

spective reveals his full genius.

With Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros, Orozco is considered one of the giants of Mexican muralism.

Visitors to Guadalajara can browse his masterwork at the Hospicio Cabañas (www.hospiciocabanas.jalisco.gob.mx), a one-time hospital and orphanage that now is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Ask for guide Erubey Montes Rodriguez, whose sense of humor in English and Spanish offers a respite from Orozco's dark themes.

Orozco painted 57 frescoes on

the site's walls and ceilings in the late 1930s, targeting politicians, the church and the Spanish conquistadors with his furious strokes of blood red and desolate black. Hernán Cortés is portrayed as a giant, soulless robot with slain natives at his feet.

On another wall, the wheel of progress crushes native cultures underneath. Overhead, the most acclaimed fresco, known as "Man of Fire," shows man simultaneously being consumed by and emerging from the flames.

Montes Rodriguez showed us

how Orozco's method creates illusions as the viewer walks past the frescoes — the wheel of progress appears to advance, crooked streets straighten, painted heads on the walls seem to turn.

For a smaller sampling of Orozco's work in Guadalajara, visit the Palacio de Gobierno, where Father Miguel Hidalgo ignites Mexico's freedom movement above the main staircase. Hidalgo frees Mexico's slaves in a second fresco in the building's Chamber of Deputies.

travel@latimes.com

If you go

THE BEST WAY TO GUADALAJARA, MEXICO
From LAX, Aeroméxico, American, Alaska, United and Delta offer nonstop service to Guadalajara, and Aeroméxico, United, Delta and American offer connecting service (change of planes). Restricted round-trip fares begin at \$326, including taxes and fees.

TEQUILA GUIDE
Experience Tequila, (503) 922-1774, www.experiencetequila.com. Clayton Szczech, a self-styled tequila evangelist, offers tours, tastings and events. Four-day package tours (not including airfare) start at \$1,255 per person.

WHERE TO SLEEP
Villa Ganz Boutique Hotel, 1739 Lopez Cotilla, Guadalajara; (877) 232-2218, www.en.villaganz.com. Like staying in a mansion — which it was. Rates from about \$99 a night.

WHERE TO EAT
La Tequila, 2830 Avenida Mexico, Colonia Terranova, Guadalajara; 011-52-333-640-3440, www.latequila.com/eng.html. This upscale restaurant serves tequilas by the dozens. Main dishes about \$12.

Casa Luna, 211 Independencia, Colonia Centro, Tlaquepaque; 011-52-331-592-2061. Prices are high by Mexico standards, but the passion fruit margaritas are intoxicating in more ways than one. Main dishes about \$16.

WHERE TO DRINK, BUY TEQUILA
Cantina la Fuente, 78 Pino Suárez, Guadalajara. Savor each sip of tequila in a setting that hasn't changed much since the cantina opened nearly 100 years ago.

Tequilas El Bújo, 164-B Juárez, Colonia Centro, Tlaquepaque; 011-52-333-659-0863, www.tequilaselbuho.com. Reasonable prices, knowledgeable staff.

TO LEARN MORE
Mexico Tourism Board, www.visitmexico.com/en/guadalajara